



They Play To Win...But Are Already Winners

Community Embraces Wounded Warrior Amputees

By Lisa Macias, Miami-Dade Police Department

As former U.S. Army Specialist Nick Clark stepped up to the plate, the opposition was undoubtedly sizing him up, calculating how to play him on the field. Outfielders thinking, “Should I play deep or shallow?” The third baseman wondering whether to cover the line in case a base hit happened to scoot by and over the bag. It was to be expected, as Nick is no ordinary softball player.

With the crack of his Louisville Slugger bat, however, those thoughts vanished as the neon yellow softball sailed to left field. A fly ball, and the first out of the inning, but the message had been sent...they’re here not only to play, but to win.

The Wounded Warrior Amputee Softball Team

Nick is one of 14 players on the Wounded Warrior Amputee Softball Team (WWAST) who recently played here in Miami during a weekend tournament hosted by the Miami-Dade Police Department (MDPD). Consisting of military veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, these are soldiers who have lost a limb due to a traumatic injury, and have learned to adapt to life again. Even though most of them wear a prosthetic device of some sort, they play with a passion and competitive drive often only seen among professional athletes. A diving catch in the outfield by Greg Reynolds; Josh Wege’s quick sprint from second to third base; or the toss from second baseman Randy Rugg to shortstop Matt Kinsey, starting a double play sequence, are all examples of how they lay it out on the field.

Traveling throughout the nation, the WWAST plays in various tournaments to raise awareness that through determination and resiliency, no challenge is unconquerable. Head coach and founder of the team David Van Sleet has been “humbled and mesmerized” by the impact the team has made stating, “To be honest, it is simply amazing where this has gone in such a short time, and I am not exactly sure



Players from the WWAST and SOUTHCOM gather for a post-game group photo. Photo by Lisa Macias.

where it is going.” The sense of camaraderie and uniqueness of the players’ injuries has definitely helped them transition into a normal lifestyle.

While still in the developmental stage, the popularity of the WWAST is spreading. What originally began as a group of active duty and veteran amputees playing in a clinic funded by a Congressional grant obtained by the University of Arizona Disability Resource Center in May 2011, has evolved into a team of legitimate contenders in the sport of softball. As a former member of the U.S. Army and a retiree of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Prosthetics Service, Van Sleet makes it clear that it is not all about winning, but actions speak louder than words. And, for these players, losing is definitely not pleasant. But, then again, it takes a winner’s mentality to overcome the obstacles they have faced.

The Tournament

Drawing 26 teams and more than 2,000 spectators to Tropical Park, the WWAST Softball Tournament on December 8, 2012, began with a procession of sleek, shiny Lexus convertibles, each

continued on page 2



*Nick Clark lets a pitch go by as he bats during the WWAST tournament December 8, 2012.
Photo by Lisa Macias.*

continued from page 1

proudly carrying WWAST players and the U.S. Honor Flag, followed by a caravan of rumbling motorcycles. In grand fashion, the WWAST players were welcomed with cheers and loud applause as they made their way to center stage.

As guest speakers approached the podium, of particular significance was the appearance of U.S. Southern Command's (SOUTHCOM) newly appointed Commander, General John F. Kelly, whose eloquent words resonated with the veterans. In one of his first community events in Miami, he spoke, "In my opinion, the best help you can give these wounded warriors is a job...they don't need pity, they won't take it ...they need to continue to serve their country and communities."

SOUTHCOM, the only military softball team in the tournament was the WWAST's first challenge. Though a very competitive game, the score remained close, but the victory went to SOUTHCOM in a 5-3 finish. After their second game, with the MDPD's "Over 40" team, the WWAST departed Tropical Park to play the Miami Hurricanes Baseball Team.

WWAST vs. University of Miami Baseball Team

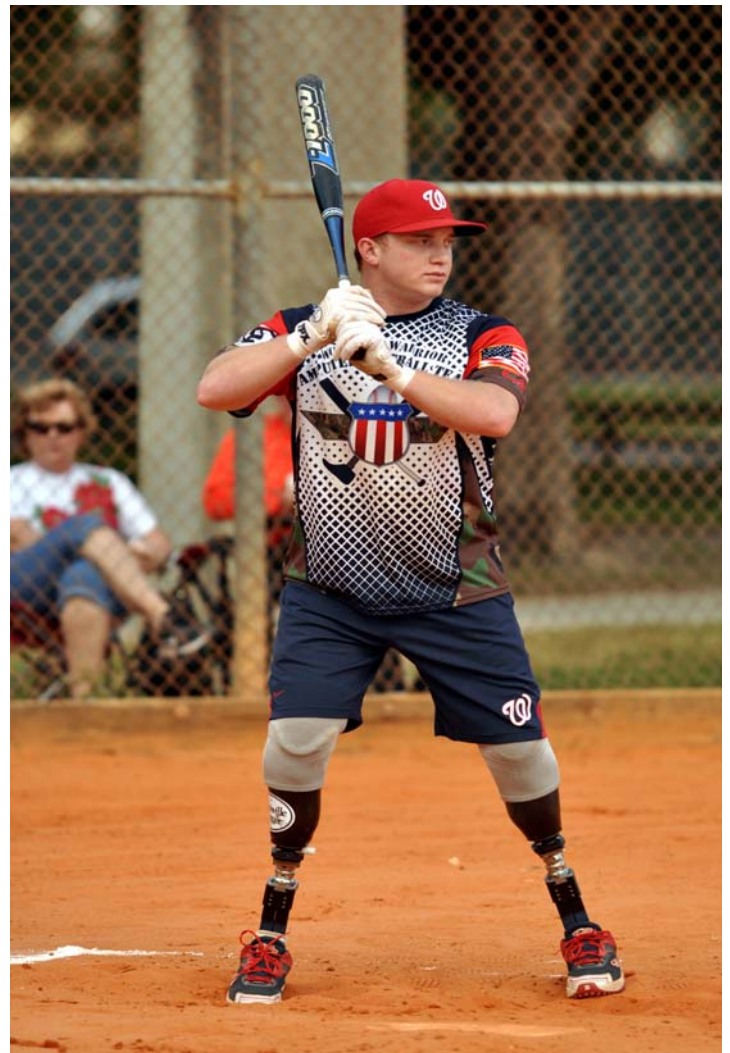
The most significant opponent the WWAST faced during their time in Miami was the University of Miami's (UM) baseball team. Coach Van Sleet considered it "one of their

most challenging and exciting games ever played," and regarded Jim Morris' baseball program "as one of the more traditional and premier baseball programs in the country."

As the game began, and in true big league form, the players were announced over the stadium's speakers, with each running out onto the field, high-fiving one another as they went down the lineup. For the UM ballplayers not accustomed to playing softball, it appeared the transition to this sport might seem daunting, but in the true spirit of competition, they proved it did not matter.

Base hits were still base hits, a pitch was a pitch, and home runs were flying out of the park. The crowd was in awe when Greg Reynolds, a wounded warrior with an amputation of his right arm and shoulder, did his usual ball and glove flip to relay the ball in from center field. And, when Matt Kinsey hit a massive shot to the fence, the stadium erupted with an enthusiasm only a true sports fan could appreciate.

Coach Morris would have preferred a sold out stadium to honor these veterans, but for the players of the WWAST, it was the sense of belonging they felt that registered the most.



*Josh Wege awaits the next pitch during the WWAST tournament December 8, 2012.
Photo by Lisa Macias.*

Once the game was over, the final score really did not matter anymore.

Final Game...Victorious

With a desire to clench a victory before the weekend was over, the WWAST was not about to lose its final game. Displaying an incredible offense, the team put up 25 runs on the scoreboard to "Team Hilton's" 13. Asked by the WWAST to pitch, MDPD Detective Alvaro Zabaleta contributed to the team's total runs by hitting an in the park grand slam.

Community Involvement

This event impacted many in our community. Local businesses generously offered both monetary and material donations. Not having to worry about lodging, meals, or transportation was one less burden the team had to bear. There were so many acts of kindness and generosity which occurred during the tournament and it's planning, that no one person may ever know them all. The following are just a few of the memorable ones which remind us how we can and should honor our soldiers.

Upon hearing that the WWAST was in Miami, members of a youth baseball program in Broward took it upon themselves to raise \$2,500 in one weekend, and donated the funds to the WWAST during the opening ceremonies.

While seeking sponsorship from Lexus of West Kendall, it was discovered through coincidence that Manager Ralph Narette was himself a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, and had also suffered a disability from an IED exploding in his face. He was invited to carry the U.S. Honor Flag during the opening ceremonies, and described the opportunity as one of the biggest honors of his life. "The cause of the WWAST hit very close to my heart, and made me realize my disability paled in comparison to what they suffered."

Mrs. Louise Lieberher, Marketing Manager for Homefield Sports Grill, reflected on how appreciative she was of our wounded warriors, especially those serving after 9/11. Her own father, a U.S. Marine who served honorably, now lays at rest at Arlington National Cemetery. Homefield Sports Grill provided unlimited food and beverages, and held a fundraiser auction during the team's visit.

At the table where souvenir shirts were being sold during the UM game, a woman purchased one \$10 shirt. After receiving the size she requested, she handed the girls a \$100 bill. The girls asked for her to wait a moment so they could get change. The woman said, "Don't worry about it...keep the change."

An elderly WWII veteran, assisted by a cane and barely able to walk, made his way to the wounded warriors' dugout and asked if he could say hello to the team. The players then shook his hand and thanked HIM for his service.

A Korean War veteran and resident of Tamarac, FL, Mr. Palmer Lugo and wife, made the drive to Miami to personally see the team play and stood in line to get autographs.

With the assistance of approximately 40 businesses and the charitable donations of the community, more than \$13,500 in donations was generated for the WWAST. It is through such support that the team will continue to successfully spread its message, "Life Without A Limb Is Limitless."

How To Help Out the WWAST

If you are interested in helping this honorable cause by making a donation or through sponsorship, please visit the team's website at:

www.woundedwarrioramputeesoftballteam.org or contact David Van Sleet at 1-802-777-7232.



*The WWAST played against the University of Miami Baseball Team during an exhibition game December 8, 2012.
Photo by Lisa Macias.*